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REAGAN REASSURES ITALIANS ON PAPAL PLOT PROBE
WASHINGTON

The White House told Vice President George Bush to reassure leaders that President Reagan supports their probe into the alleged plot to kill the Pope, even if the trail leads to Soviet leader Yuri Andropov, NBC News reported Sunday.

NBC, on its evening news, said Bush, during his visit to the American embassy in Rome Sunday, also was charged with stopping "all leaks, principally from CIA officials, that tended to dishearten the Italians and discourage the investigation."

Following the report, a White House spokesman said Reagan last month publicly stated the U.S. position on the probe, expressing "full confidence that the investigation is in capable hands, that the Italians are carrying out a rigorous investigation."

"The various reports in this country that the U.S. is encouraging or discouraging the investigation just are not true," spokesman Mort Allin said. "We think the Italians should proceed without people prejudging them. The fact is they are carrying it out and you accept the results of the investigation."

Allin said the topic of the probe "certainly is expected to come up during Vice President Bush's meetings with Italian leaders, but he simply is stating U.S. policy in this matter."

A U.S. embassy spokesman in Rome said most of Bush's time Sunday was "private time" with a few meetings with Italian leaders at the embassy. He said no details of the meetings would be disclosed.

Allin said the White House would have no comment on stories regarding the leaks.

"There have been stories the last couple of weeks that U.S. government officials have been putting a little bit of cold water on the whole story," he said. "We're just not taking a position. The Italians will make the decision on the outcome of the whole investigation."

NBC said leaks from CIA officials in Washington appeared in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal this past week, stating that Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk who tried to kill the Pope, was "crazy," and therefore neither the Bulgarians nor the Russians would have used him.

"But on this point, either the CIA is badly informed or chooses for whatever reason to badly inform the public," NBC correspondent Marvin Kalb said, "because the evidence suggests Agca was anything but crazy."

NBC quoted Roman magistrate Severino Santiapichi, who said in on the early interrogations, as saying "all the interrogations of Agca revealed a lucidity."

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It quoted senior Vatican official Cardinal Silvio Oddi as saying, "This man, he was not a fool. That's proved. He's an intelligent man."

Kalb said the White House was "so agitated" that National Security Advisor William Clark and CIA Director William Casey conferred last week and ordered a full-scale investigation into the CIA leaks, "and warned in messages to the embassy in Rome that the leakers would be severely punished."

Kalb said CIA officials' motives for going against company orders and administration policy are unclear.

"What is clear is that the President's men have put out the word that if Andropov is found to be implicated in the Papal plot and if this damages the arms control negotiations, then so be it. The president is described as wanting the whole truth out and letting the chips fall where they may."